

TOWARD AN ONTOLOGICAL ETHICS: DERRIDA'S READING OF HEIDEGGER AND LEVINAS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is to examine a few aspects of Jacques Derrida's reading of the philosophy of Heidegger and Levinas. Specifically, we intend to show that the criticism Derrida directs towards certain themes in Levinas's thought at the same time contains a revaluation of Heidegger's ontology as it was developed during the 1920s, before the so-called *Kehre*. What this triple hermeneutic comparison puts into play is the relationship between ethics and ontology. In critiquing the relationship between these two concepts in Levinas, Derrida seems to move closer to the way they are described and developed in both *Being and Time* and in Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics. Finally, we will try to show how this reevaluation of ontology by Derrida determines his approach to the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy, whose ethics, differently from Levinas's, is an ethics of ontology.

KEYWORDS

Ethics, Ontology, Derrida, Heidegger, Levinas.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this work, we will try to show that the three main moments in Derrida's interpretation of Levinas reveal a continuity that often remains undetected by scholars. This continuity involves the relationship between ethics and ontology: contrary to any appearances gleaned from a superficial reading, in reality, between 1964 and 1997 Derrida did not change his position on the way the two spheres should relate, and did not for this reason reevaluate Levinas while instead discrediting Heidegger.

The first issue worth highlighting when confronting these three philosophers is the widespread understanding that Derrida, especially when dealing with ethics, should be considered much closer to Levinas than to Heidegger.

In an important article about postmodern ethics¹, Scott Lash grouped together Levinas, Derrida and Bauman. According to Lash, these three authors share a focus on unconditional responsibility in face of the demand of the other as the element that characterizes their ethics as an ethics of respect and difference. In Lash's view, this ethics remains too abstract, as it lacks the dimension of "groundedness", that is, the reference to concrete forms of life. Postmodern ethics would be an ethics of respect, but not an ethics of recognition. These concrete forms of life are detected by Lash not only in philosophers of communitarianism, but also in "*Heidegger's grounding of the singular 'I' into a world, an ethical life, a set of practices*"². Here the reference is to the section of *Being and Time* where Heidegger refers to the sharing of signifiers and practices that are common on the part of a historically situated community. Indeed, in paragraphs 73-74, Heidegger speaks of *Dasein* absorbed in pre-reflexive practices whether with equipment (*Zeuge*) or with other finite human beings. Similarly, the Heideggerian concepts of "preoccupation" (*besorgen*) for things, and "solicitude" (*Fürsorgen*) for other human beings, reveal a situated and positioned structure of this community comprised of equipment and *Dasein* that are valued and cared for.

This means that the relationship with the other is not a relationship based on an absolute exteriority where someone comes as an event, breaking the horizon of knowledge of the ego. Levinas, Derrida and Bauman, according to Lash, all criticize this primacy of knowledge over ethics³. By stressing the absence of a ground, and by emphasizing the lack of concreteness of forms of life in postmodern ethics, Lash is implicitly rejecting the separation between ethics and ontology that Levinas advocates. Ontology, indeed, is the sphere of Being and beings, of concrete and empirical relationships that are excluded by the paradigm of the unconditional responsibility for the Other.

Therefore, Lash draws a link between Levinas and Derrida in their reciprocal rejection of Heideggerian *Dasein* as situated in a matrix of practices and signifiers that it shares with other *Dasein*.

Many other scholars, especially in the 80's and early 90's, approached Levinas and Derrida, stressing the affinity of their ethical theories, especially with regard to the issue of hospitality conceived as unconditional duty towards the other⁴. After all, it's Derrida himself who, in a discussion with André Ja-

¹ Scott Lash, *Postmodern Ethics. The missing Ground*, in "Theory, Culture & Society", 1996, 13 (2): 91-104.

² Ibid., p. 94

³ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴ Among others : R. Bernasconi, *The trace of Levinas in Derrida*, in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. D. Wood and R. Bernasconi, Parousia Press, Coventry 1985, pp. 17-44; ID., *Deconstruction*

cob, declared a substantial agreement with many of Levinas' positions, including those more related to the ethical sphere⁵.

In some cases, as we saw in Lash's article, the approach of Derrida and Levinas contained the simultaneous separation between Derrida and Heidegger, a point echoed by Simon Critchley, who, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*⁶ stressed what he defined as "an emerging homology" between Levinas and Derrida⁷. According to Critchley, the work of Derrida contains a permanent tension towards ethics as something essential for deconstruction. The ethics in question is specifically that of Levinas, which Derrida would retrace in particular when referring to the ethical duty as an unconditional imperative, something that, in Critchley's view, emerges especially in the pages of *Afterword*⁸. Moreover, in Critchley's reading, this homology strengthens itself as Derrida pinpoints in Levinas's ethics the overcoming of Heidegger's reservation about the separation of ethics and ontology in the history of western metaphysics. Indeed, in the *Letter on Humanism*⁹, Heidegger contested the tripartition of logic, physics and ethics as separate regions of enquiry carried out by western philosophy. In his opinion, this separation conceals the original union between ethics and ontology, which he detected in Heraclitus's 119th fragment "*ethos anthropoi daimon*". Heidegger's translation of this fragment is "The (familiar) abode is for man the open region for the presencing of god (the unfamiliar one)". Thus, what Heidegger defines as the "originary ethics", that is, the proximity of human thought to Being and its manifestation, goes past any separation between ethics and ontology, which, following this line of reasoning, is still trapped in a thought of the single beings. This thought is still metaphysical as it is incapable of reaching Being itself. Critchley noted that Derrida, though sharing Heidegger's concerns about the metaphysical implications of setting the priority of ethics over other spheres (such as ontology), believes that the sense Levinas attributes to the word ethics implies an over-

and the Possibility of Ethics, in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. J. Sallis, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1987, pp. 122-139; J. Llewelyn, *Levinas, Derrida and Others vis-à-vis*, in *Beyond Metaphysics*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, 1985, pp. 185-206.

⁵ The conversation is transcribed in the volume *Altérités*, Osiris, Paris 1986.

⁶ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Blackwell Publishers, 1992. We will quote from the second edition, published by Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999.

⁷ Critchley further develops these considerations in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*, Verso, London 1999.

⁸ J. Derrida, *Afterword. Toward an Ethics of Discussion*, in *Limited Inc.*, tr. S. Weber, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1988.

⁹ M. Heidegger, *Brief über den "Humanismus"*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1947. Trans. William McNeil: *Letter on Humanism*, in *Pathmarks*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 239-277.

coming of these same concerns. Indeed, in the aforementioned *Altérités*, Derrida claims that when Levinas speaks of ethics, he does so in a very different way to traditional western philosophy¹⁰. According to Critchley, this divergence emerges especially in *Otherwise than Being*, where Levinas “proposes the thought of the Good beyond Being as a third option that exceeds the ontological difference between Being and beings”¹¹.

It is thus interesting to note how the homology between Levinas and Derrida reflected in these cases, as well as in many others, is often outlined through a simultaneous opposition between Derrida and Heidegger with regard to the ethics-ontology relationship. Derrida, according to predominant interpretations of his thought, would follow Levinas’s lesson on ethics, thus separating it from ontology and refusing Heidegger’s option of an “originary ethics” in connection to ontology.

An opinion of this sort may form in some critics because the polemical apparatus that Derrida creates when he confronts Heidegger is certainly formidable and, therefore, rightly deserving of center stage. However, it is also important to note that this view does not exhaust the gamut of assessments and opinions that Derrida has to offer on Heidegger’s philosophy.

It is certainly true that Derrida, although he was responding to a series of ideas provided by Heidegger, did try to reconvert and reformulate the most problematic aspects of Heidegger’s philosophy as part of what can be defined, to all intents and purposes, as a deconstruction. In spite of this, or perhaps precisely thanks to this double maneuver of recovery and reversal, Derrida’s deconstruction does not imply a total devaluation of Heidegger’s philosophy. Rather, he preserves and values some of its elements, especially the already mentioned relationship between ethics and ontology.

However, the complexity of the relationship between Derrida and Heidegger is such that in many cases these aspects are not made directly explicit; instead, they become clear in a partially indirect way through the simultaneous deconstruction of other philosophies. The deconstruction thus becomes at the same time an operation of “reconstruction”, since by emphasizing the aporias and metaphysical compromises of one author, through a comparative process, he paradoxically succeeds in emphasizing or at least highlighting (in a positive sense) the most important aspects of another, previously (but also subsequently) deconstructed author.

This process is disclosed, indeed, in a particularly significant way through the criticism that Derrida directs against Levinas in some of his texts. Out of

¹⁰ *Altérités*, p. 71.

¹¹ S. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, pp. 16-17.

this criticism, there emerges a simultaneous reevaluation of Heidegger's thinking, which in the end, as we will try to show, positions Derrida closer to the ethics of ontology that Jean-Luc Nancy proposed. Nancy, indeed, sets off precisely from Heideggerian ethics conceived as "originary ethics", though changing the sense of this expression in a way that matches Derrida's point of view.

2. LEVINAS'S CRITICISM OF HEIDEGGER

Before going through Derrida's reading of Levinas, it is opportune to recall the main points through which Levinas builds his criticism of Heideggerian philosophy. As we said, Levinas is the philosopher who, more than anyone else, theorized the dominance of the ethical over the ontological, and consequently, a clear separation between ethics and ontology. This separation feeds off the criticism of Heidegger's ontology, considered similar to the entire course of Western thought on being as a thought of the One, of the Same, and especially on the primacy of theory which no ontology has ever managed to overturn.

If, with Husserl, phenomenology remained a slave to the paradigms we have just described, despite some seductive appearances, Heidegger's ontology is in reality far from denying them. Which portions of Heidegger's ontology lead to the thought of the Same, in Levinas's view?

First of all, there is the distinction between Being and existents, between *Sein* and *Seiendes*, which also asserts the primacy of the former over the latter. This primacy is that of comprehension, to the extent that the distinction subordinates the relation with individual existents to the relation with the Being of these existents:

Being and Time has argued but one sole thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity. [...] To affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom.¹²

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infiniti*, Nijhoff, The Hague 1971. Trans. Alphonso Lingis: *Totality and Infinity*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1991, p. 45.

The relation with Being in general is therefore a relation with a neutral term, comparable to the concept thought which hinders the relation to the Other as infinitely other.¹³

In Levinas's eyes, Heidegger remains trapped in this schema:

In Heidegger coexistence is, to be sure, taken as a relationship with the Other irreducible to objective cognition; but in the final analysis it also rests on the relationship with being in general, on comprehension, on ontology. [...] Moreover, for Heidegger intersubjectivity is a coexistence, a we prior to the I and the other, a neutral intersubjectivity. The face-to-face both announces a society, and permits the maintaining of a separated I.¹⁴

This remark on intersubjectivity leads us to one of the salient points of the question. Here, Levinas is telling us that the relation to Being in Heidegger is a relation of comprehension with the Neuter; but he is also telling us that such a relationship hides another one – the relationship between *Dasein*, already oriented toward a kind of indistinct totality, since Heidegger does not conceive subjectivity as a finite, closed totality that enters into relationship with the infinitely other. What we have here, of course, are the Levinasian themes of the *Il y a*(the “there is”), understood as neutrality and indistinctiveness of Being, and hypostasis as the initial moment of separation in which a proper I affirms itself, essential to the subsequent relationship with the infinitely other¹⁵. There is something here that Levinas seems to exclude, the implications of which we will return to over the course of this paper: a possibility of the I to transcend itself and differentiate itself that can give rise to an originary *Mitsein*, understood not as substantiality or fusion, but as a combination of the plural singularities¹⁶. The immediacy of the relationship to others (which is excluded by a subjectivity that is at first closed and then in relation with the absolutely other) gets bogged down in that relationship of comprehension, and of reduction of the Other to the Same that we mentioned earlier. For the relation with the infinitely other, the I cannot be left out of consideration.

In refusing to start from this radical separation prior to the encounter with the face of the Other, Heidegger falls into a definition of the I (or ego) that im-

¹³ Ibid., p. 44-45.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

¹⁵ For an overview of these themes : E. Levinas, *Le Temps et l'Autre*, Fata Morgana, Montpellier 1980. Trans. Richard A. Cohen, *Time and the Other*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987.

¹⁶ As we said, Lash associated Levinas, Bauman and Derrida as representatives of postmodern ethics. The refusal of an original *Mitsein* is the reason why Zygmunt Bauman backs Levinas while contesting Heidegger's social ontology. See: Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge 1993.

plies a kind of transcendence of its comprehensive structures with respect to the empirical manifestation of alterity – a sort of pre-determination due precisely to the centrality of comprehension and to the difference between Being and existents:

Comprehension is a way of access. [...] What is it that makes this access, this comprehension possible? According to Heidegger, the fact of relating the perceived object to a sketch of its structure that we trace out in advance: things are understood in a movement of the spirit that directs itself, projects itself toward them. Here we find what seems to be a familiar idea: we are able to grasp an object thanks to an *a priori* schema. Perception is always based on a pre-perception, the vestiges of previous activity, of thought. The comprehension of Being in general, the meaning of this word, is the primordial sketch of a horizon in which each being in particular, or each of its essences, can appear to us. The comprehension of Being in general, a relation that at first sight seems to be the most abstract, but which is at the same time the most familiar, because we have always already comprehended it, is the supreme condition for the comprehension of particular beings.¹⁷

Levinas seems to set up a sort of transcendental apriorism in Heidegger's structure of the understanding. Clearly, this is an implicit reference to the *Kantbuch*, in which Heidegger dedicates himself to analyzing *a priori* structures of knowledge in Kant, relating them to the problem of knowledge of Being in general, independently of individual entities.

Is Levinas's criticism directed toward the "early" Heidegger, then? There is no doubt that *Being and Time* is his main, although not exclusive, target. However, it hardly seems legitimate to refer to Heidegger's existential analytic and ontology of the 1920s in general by somehow establishing the pure apriorism of knowledge. All of Heidegger's efforts during this phase of his philosophy are directed toward providing the transcendental structures with an immediate factual reference, in order to ensure that an originary alterity lurks in phenomena that are pre-empirical but that carry within them the very injunction to facticity and thus to finitude.

Referring to *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, as we know, in this text Heidegger seeks to highlight the decisive character of temporality in the very constitution of the categories and, hence, the relation between temporality and logic. What he attempts to do, in the broadest sense, by demonstrating the importance of the intuition of time in Kant, is to clarify the relationship between

¹⁷ E. Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, J. Vrin, Paris 1949. Trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith: *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL, 1998. This quote is translated from the Italian edition: *Scoprire l'esistenza con Husserl e Heidegger*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 1998, pp. 88-89.

metaphysics and finitude. At stake in the first term is the transcendental structure of subjectivity, or in Heideggerian terms, the knowledge of Being in general as opposed to that of entities.

The privilege granted to the pure intuition of time (through the medium of transcendental imagination and schematism) even within the *a priori* knowledge provided by the categories and by the *I think* has the function, in Heidegger's view, of highlighting the finitude of theoretical knowledge even in its transcendental structures: hence, the finite nature of the knowledge of Being in general.

This finitude of the transcendental structures, this factual reference to the pre-empirical, is found in the *Kantbuch*, in paragraph 30, where Heidegger also analyzes the problem of ethics in Kant. At this point, what Heidegger identifies in duty is an unbreakable bond with finitude, based on the simultaneous connection between duty and lack:

A creature that is fundamentally interested in a duty knows itself in a not-yet-having-fulfilled, so that what indeed it should do becomes questionable to it. This not-yet of a fulfilling, which is itself still undetermined, gives us a clue that a creature whose innermost interest is with a duty is fundamentally finite.¹⁸

In this way, therefore, the ethical demand requires an immediate transition to the factual; or rather, the very fact of "sensing" or perceiving the ethical demand is a sign of the empiricity inherent in the demand itself, even where it is perceived in consciousness prior to a factual encounter with the other.

Without elaborating further on this point, we note, however, that the finitude of the transcendental structures as they are thus defined implies a factual, ontological reference, also belonging to the ethical sphere. And at the same time, this ontological reference is correlative to an originary alterity of the I, which even in the solitude of the moral conscience can sense the presence of the other as a feeling of lack and therefore as an injunction to the empirical.

This constitutive alterity of *Dasein*, or *Dasein*'s alienation from itself, had already appeared in sections 55 to 57 of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger analyzed the phenomenon of conscience as the call:

Indeed the call is precisely something which we ourselves have neither planned nor prepared for nor voluntarily performed, nor have we ever done so. 'It' calls, against our expectations and even against our will. On

¹⁸ M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Verlag Fred. Cohen, Bonn 1929. Trans. Richard Taft: *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1990, p. 151.

the other hand, the call undoubtedly does not come from someone else who is with me in the world. The call comes from me and yet from beyond me and over me. [...] The fact that the call is not something which is explicitly performed by me, but that rather 'it' does the calling, does not justify seeking the caller in some entity with a character other than that of Dasein.¹⁹

In any case, as has been remarked, it is precisely this presence of the other in the I as an originary phenomenon what Levinas cannot accept. For him, ethics understood as a metaphysics of the encounter with the Other stands in the way of positively referring to an ontology of the singular plural, because it requires an interior, separate egoicity from the outset.

3. DERRIDA'S INTERPRETATION OF LEVINAS IN *VIOLENCE AND METAPHYSICS*

Derrida's confrontation with Levinas can be divided into three principal moments, although a series of implicit and explicit suggestions and allusions can be found in many of his texts. These three instances, in chronological order, are *Violence and metaphysics: an essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas*, published in 1964;²⁰ *At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am*, published in 1980;²¹ and finally, the two pieces collected in the book *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, appearing in 1997.²²

On first examination of the three writings, Derrida's position toward Levinas seems to undergo a major shift. While the 1964 essay is the most critical, the later texts are not only more charitable, they could even be seen as setting up a philosophical heritage that passes from Levinas to Derrida, some-

¹⁹ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1927. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson: *Being and Time*, Harper & Row, New York 1962, pp. 320-321.

²⁰ J. Derrida, *Violence et métaphysique. Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas*, in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 3 and 4, 1964, subsequently reproduced in Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris 1967. Trans. Alan Bass: *Violence and metaphysics: an essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas*, in *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, London, 1978, pp. 97-192.

²¹ J. Derrida, *En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici*, in Various Authors, *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, Jean-Michel Place Editeur, Paris 1980, later appearing in Jacques Derrida, *Psyche. Inventions de l'autre*, Galilée, Paris 1987. Trans. Peggy Kamuf: *At This Very Moment in this Work Here I Am*, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Volume 1, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 2007, pp. 143-190.

²² J. Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, Éditions Galilée, Paris 1997. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas: *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 1999.

thing that would seem quite unthinkable in *Violence and Metaphysics*. However, as we will attempt to show, this is not a real change in Derrida's perspective toward Levinas, since the instances that mark out his progressive appreciation of Levinas's work from 1980 onwards are in the final analysis already present in his 1964 critique. This fact is especially interesting given that it is Heidegger who occupies a central position both in Derrida's criticism and in his praise of Levinas's philosophy. The criticism against an ethics devoid of ontology, found in the 1964 essay, is pursued by Derrida with constant reference to Heidegger. In the same way, later instances of Derrida's Levinasian hermeneutics seem to add up to an "*overcoming of Levinas vis-à-vis Heidegger*"²³ that in reality, as we will show, is only apparent. In each case the relationship between ethics and ontology, central to all three essays, is thought out and articulated by Derrida starting from the relationship between Levinas and Heidegger.

Let us begin with *Violence and Metaphysics*. What we find in this text is a critical reformulation of most of the themes through which Levinas's opposition to Heidegger's ontology was expressed, as we saw. The absence of alterity in the ego and the need for the initial separation are clearly pegged by Derrida as one of the points in Levinas's philosophy that urgently require critiquing. In describing Levinas's position, Derrida notes that for Levinas

The ego is the same. The alterity or negativity interior to the ego, the interior difference, is but an appearance [...] the ego cannot engender alterity within itself without encountering the Other²⁴.

This goes straight to the point: for Levinas neither self-transcendence nor the originary alterity of the self are conceivable – only the encounter with the absolutely other starting from a closed subjectivity.

What is Derrida's response to this position? A polemical one, indubitably. Surprisingly, perhaps, his criticism of Levinas takes its cue from a defense, on the theme of alterity, of the work of Husserl, in particular his famous fifth Cartesian meditation.²⁵ As we know, Levinas strongly criticizes the concept of analogical appresentation and the idea of the other as *alter ego*, which he sees as attempts to reduce it to the same. Thus, Husserl's fifth Cartesian meditation

²³ Silvano Petrosino, introduction to the Italian edition of *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas. Addio a Emmanuel Lévinas*, Jaca Book, Milan 1998, p. 18.

²⁴ J. Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, pp. 116-117.

²⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1950. Trans. Dorion Cairns: *Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1999.

does nothing but demonstrate the fundamental incompatibility of phenomenology with a genuine thought on alterity. In this context, for Levinas, concepts such as horizon and, above all, intentionality, are totally inappropriate, because they can substantially be traced back to the voluntarism of a subject who is master of his actions and seeks to make the non-I *proper* to him.

Derrida's defense against Husserl on this theme is quite clear, as he considers the reference to the analogical appresentation, not a reduction of the other to the same, but rather something that recognizes the separation of the other from the I, avoiding any kind of assimilation of the former by the latter²⁶.

Starting from Husserl, then, it sets out the necessity for a thought on alterity that is different from that of Levinas on the absolutely other – a thought in which one starts from an Other who is recognized as such by the I. This does not mean assimilation, since the other is simply recognized as other; but analogical appresentation at the same time prevents it from being made into a metaphysical or infinite entity, since the I makes a formal analogy from itself to the other that allows it to be identified as a finite being.

And yet, although Derrida starts from Husserl, there is one more step that he believes he has to take in order to repudiate Levinas's idea of an absolutely other. This step regards the originary alterity of the ego – clearly not a Husserlian theme, but unavoidable nonetheless for arriving at an ontology that is at the same time a thought of alterity (and therefore an ethics):

[This exercise] would mean that the expression ‘infinitely other’ or ‘absolutely other’ cannot be stated and thought simultaneously; that the other cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other; and that, consequently, the same is not a totality closed in upon itself, an identity playing with itself, having only the appearance of alterity, in what Levinas calls economy, work, and history. How could there be a ‘play of the Same’ if alterity itself was not already in the Same, with a meaning of inclusion doubtless betrayed by the word in?²⁷

Having reasserted this need to think the alterity of the I, what remains to be seen is how Heidegger could fall under this paradigm, as well as the ineffectiveness, as Derrida sees them, of the criticisms that Levinas directs toward the German philosopher.

As we said, Levinas explains the difference between Being and existents by a relationship of comprehension that traces out the contours of a sort of *a priori* structure of knowledge. Thanks to this, the encounter with the other exist-

²⁶ J. Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, pp. 154-155.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 158.

ent is preceded by the comprehension of Being as a third, neutral term. Derrida firmly rejects this kind of interpretation, which he views as being out of line with the letter and spirit of Heidegger's text:

Being, since it is nothing outside the existent, a theme which Levinas had commented upon so well previously, could in no way precede the existent, whether in time, or in dignity, etc. Nothing is more clear, as concerns this, in Heidegger's thought. Henceforth, one cannot legitimately speak of the 'subordination' of the existent to Being, or, for example, of the ethical relation to the ontological relation. To precomprehend or explicate the implicit relation of Being to the existent is not to submit the existent (for example, someone) to Being in a violent fashion. Being is but the Being-of this existent, and does not exist outside it as a foreign power, or as a hostile or neutral impersonal element.²⁸

Moreover, it is the thought of being, a certain thought of being, that can open the ethical relation. This thought of Being is the thought of "letting-be," which allows the Being of the Other to manifest without the preliminary violence on the part of the thought of an I. The difference between Being and existent thus concerns the latter's possibility of expression:

'To let be' is an expression of Heidegger's which does not mean, as Levinas seems to think, to let be as an 'object of comprehension first,' and, in the case of the Other, as 'interlocutor afterward.' [...] If it belongs to the essence of the Other first and foremost to be an 'interlocutor' and to be interpellated, then the 'letting-be' will let the Other be what it is, will respect it as interpellated-interlocutor. The 'letting-be' does not only, or by privilege, concern impersonal things. To let the other be in its existence and essence as other means that what gains access to thought, or (and) what thought gains access to, is that which is essence and that which is existence; and that which is the Being which they both presuppose. Without this, no letting-be would be possible, and first of all, the letting be of respect and of the ethical commandment addressing itself to freedom. Violence would reign to such a degree that it would no longer even be able to appear and be named.²⁹

Therefore, if Levinas wanted to develop a true ethics that is consistent with his fundamental objectives, in Derrida's view, he has no choice but to resort to this thought of Being as a "letting-be" of the Other – this ontology that is consistent with Derrida's entire path, starting from *Voice and Phenomenon*³⁰, and that also implies the originary presence of alterity in the I.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 170.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

³⁰ J. Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène. Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, P.U.F., Paris 1967. Trans. Leonard Lawlor: *Voice and Phenomenon. Introduction to the Phenomenology of Husserl*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1973.

In this context, comprehension in Heidegger does not refer to anything transcendental in the sense of the *a priori*, to anything purely pre-empirical. Rather, it concerns this relationship that lets the Other be, and establishes thought itself as that which welcomes difference.

3. DERRIDA'S INTERPRETATION OF LEVINAS IN *ADIEU TO EMMANUEL LEVINAS*

How do things stand in the next two moments of Derrida's interpretation of Levinas, however? In both there can be noted elements of continuity and discontinuity that complicate the question of the relationship between ethics and ontology, as they complicate the associated question regarding Derrida's judgment of Heidegger through his critique of Levinas. The reason we are going to examine the 1997 essays is because, perhaps because of a continuity in the theoretical path that is reflected chronologically, Derrida's interpretation of Levinas is particularly laudatory. Does this mean that the elements of discontinuity from the 1964 *Violence and Metaphysics* prevail, and that Derrida has changed his own theme of the relationship between ontology and ethics, granting exclusivity to the latter that discredits Heidegger's ontology of the 1920s?

The main theme of the second piece from 1997, *A Word of Welcome*, is already expressed by the title. To all intents and purposes, this is an essay on welcoming – on hospitality. The emphasis Derrida gives to these themes during the last phase of his work, dating from the 1990s, shows that Levinas's legacy was gradually gaining force in his philosophy. This at least partially also clarifies the apparent shift from the question of the relationship between ethics and ontology that we are about to analyze.

In the essay in question, Derrida focuses especially on *Totality and Infinity*, defined as a genuine “*treatise on hospitality*”.³¹ Here Levinas unites the phenomenon of hospitality with a particular characterization of consciousness as intentionality – not the anticipation of a subjectively-oriented objective content, but rather, openness to the Other: “*It [intentionality, consciousness of . . .] is attention to speech or welcome of the face, hospitality and not thematization*”.³² In this sense, for Levinas as interpreted by Derrida, intentionality and reason itself take form as receptivity, sensitivity, immediate opening to the face, to the infinity of the Other. Reason, understood in this

duction to the problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2011.

³¹ J. Derrida, *A Word of Welcome*, p. 21.

³² E. Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, p. 308.

way, is reason as the law of hospitality. The unconditionality of the relationship with the Other is thus also expressed, in *Totality and Infinity*, by reversing the way that, traditionally, both reason and intentionality are understood, namely, in reference to a subject who is master of himself and the center of his acts.

By integrating his reading of *Totality and Infinity* with that of *Otherwise than Being*, Derrida then reaches the second focal point of his interpretation: the dissymmetry in the ethical relationship of the face-to-face determined by the simultaneity of the third in this relationship.

As we know, in Levinas, the third party is the eruption of justice as a political issue, of society understood as what is irreducible to the ethical relation of the subject with the face of the infinitely other.³³ In this sense, thirdness or illeity carry the signs of what, by its very nature, is linked to calculation, to commensurability, to the drafting and definition of a series of conditions in immediate and direct contrast with the purely unconditional character of the ethical relationship. To characterize the third party as contemporary or co-originating with the Other thus means to erode the purity of the ethical relationship.³⁴

This eruption of the third is defined in terms of a “perjury.” Furthermore, this perjury co-origines with the ethical relationship; it does not intervene at a later time as a protective measure from the risk of violence; rather, political justice is joined with the face-to-face precisely through their commonality of origin. Perjury, by eroding the face-to-face, can only take shape as an “other than ethics in ethics”, which Derrida, perhaps not coincidentally, comes to define as ontology:

[...] if the face to face with the unique engages the infinite ethics of my responsibility for the other in a sort of oath before the letter, an unconditional respect or fidelity, then the ineluctable emergence of the third, and, with it, of justice, would signal an initial perjury [parjure]. Silent, passive, painful, but inevitable, such perjury is not accidental and secondary, but is as originary as the experience of the face. Justice would begin with this perjury. [...] Like the third who does not wait, the proceedings hat open both ethics and justice are in the process of committing quasi-transcendental or originary, indeed, pre-originary, perjury.

³³ Cfr.:E. Levinas, *Le moi et la totalité* (1954), in *Entre nous. Essai sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris, 1991. Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav: *The I and the Totality*, in *Entre nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, Columbia University Press, New York 2000, pp. 13-38; and *La trace de l'autre*, in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris 1967. Trans. Alphonso Lingis: *The Trace of the Other*, in *Deconstruction in Context*, Mark Taylor (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, pp. 345-359; and *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague 1974. Trans. Alphonso Lingis: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht and Boston, 1978, pp.153-162.

³⁴ J. Derrida, *A Word of Welcome*, pp. 32-33.

One might even call it ontological, once ethics is joined to everything that exceeds and betrays it (ontology, precisely, synchrony, totality, the State, the political, etc.).³⁵

Silvano Petrosino notes in the introduction to the Italian edition that “the originary mediation of the third implies (here, more than thirty years later, “Violence and Metaphysics” is confirmed) the originary character of a certain impurity and the emergence of an essential contamination[...] Derrida’s definition, this Derridean definition of justice, is now understandable. Since it is based on the figure of the third as internal to the uniqueness of the face, it forcefully reintroduces the theme of ‘essential contamination’ that was already clearly emphasized in the 1964 and 1980 essays”.³⁶

Thus, a continuity in Derrida’s three essays on Levinas is being emphasized here – a continuity that, among other things, is based precisely on this folding of the ethical relationship, a folding that Derrida more or less explicitly relates to ontology – something, moreover, that follows as a consequence of the path he embarked on, when, earlier in his Husserlian hermeneutics, he stressed the originary alterity of the I. This originary alterity, as we have seen, cannot be completely contained by the ethical dimension; rather, its pre-empirical character is precisely what relates it to ontology.

Following this line of reasoning, it could be argued that the discussion on the co-originarity of the Other and the third in no way relates the ethical relationship to a pre-factual sphere.

However, on returning to the main question addressed by the 1997 essay, namely, that of hospitality, it is easy to see how Derrida’s thematization goes explicitly in the direction of a pre-ethicity no longer and not only based on the *a posteriori* relationship between two subjects; rather, it leads to the founding of an archi-original ethics insofar as it precedes itself in its pre-empiricity. In this case, ethical immediacy is not only interrupted by the co-originarity of the third, it is moreover founded by outlining the contours of a pre-ethicity of ethics itself.

Hospitality, in Derrida’s Levinas, takes form as a dimension that binds together the theoretical, the moral, and the political. The term is first related to the sphere of consciousness, of the intimacy of the I, and in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas characterizes it in relation to the feminine: “And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

³⁶ S. Petrosino, introduction to the Italian edition of *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas. Addio a Emmanuel Lévinas*, pp. 27-28.

woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation”³⁷ What this means is that being-at-one’s-home is already welcoming in itself, since the woman – the feminine – represents both the interiority of one’s own dwelling as well as the unconditional opening that hospitality presupposes. Thus it is there that the I has a dwelling, its own consciousness as its dwelling place, which is open to an exteriority – the exteriority of a welcoming without conditions. This position is certainly different from the one that saw the *a posteriori* encounter between the I separated from the ontological indifference of the *ilya* and the Other.

Furthermore, this *a priori* unconditionality of the welcoming, in its difference with the mastering of the face of the Other that takes place through the encounter, is precisely what, in Derrida’s opinion, traces out the contours of an ethical structure that precedes ethics itself – an archi-originarity that inscribes in the I the principle (albeit always a moral one because it is linked to the ethical responsibility toward the other) of its exteriorization³⁸.

The precedence of ethics to itself – pre-ethics or archi-originarity ethics – is thus best disclosed by the figure of the Woman and by the category of hospitality. If the host is also in some way *already* a guest, as Levinas’s text repeatedly stresses; if the host, in the very act of welcoming the Other, is a guest welcomed by the Other – a subject in whom the activity of hosting and the passivity of being hosted are rooted in the interchangeability of positions that the act of hospitality gives rise to – then the same hosting individual discovers that he is a stranger to himself. In other words, he discovers the presence and sign of his alteration within himself³⁹.

It is therefore clear that the subject’s non-belonging to himself in his own dwelling, which is to say, in his own consciousness and hospitality, acquires a thoroughly transcendental value, where this term refers not to the infinite transcendence of the other experienced in the encounter, but the transcendence of the individual I as originary alterity inscribed in its *a priori* structures preceding the experience itself. Indeed, Derrida himself points out that the feminine as unconditional hospitality is a theoretical framework that has nothing in common with the ethics of the *a posteriori* relationship. In doing this, however, he takes a further step that separates his conclusions on the theme of the feminine from those outlined on the question of the co-originarity between the Other and the third, between ethics and political justice, differentiating this *a priori* pre-ethical from any kind of ontology:

³⁷ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 155.

³⁸ J. Derrida, *A Word of Welcome*, p. 38-39.

³⁹ Ibid., p 41.

For this text [a previous passage from Levinas] defines the welcome par excellence, the welcome or welcoming of absolute, absolutely originary, or even pre-originary hospitality, nothing less than the pre-ethical origin of ethics, on the basis of femininity. That gesture reaches a depth of essential or meta-empirical radicality that takes sexual difference into account in an ethics emancipated from ontology. It confers the opening of the welcome upon ‘the feminine being’ and not upon the fact of empirical women.⁴⁰

The ethics of welcoming is therefore let loose from empirical fact. Following this reasoning, it is clear that this is an ethics that, in principle, is entirely non-ontological, separated from Being at the time it is inscribed in pre-facticity. If the need for hospitality is indeed unconditional, no *factual* condition can affect the apriorism of this principle. Ontology would then be expelled and Levinasian ethics, consistent with its fundamental objectives, would remain through and through an ethics that materializes through its opposition to ontology.

However, it is also clear that this type of pre-empiricity describes a dynamic quite different from that of the encounter of an I that has parted company from the anonymity of the *il y a* with the absolutely other. While in the second case the ethics of the face-to-face is a-ontological because, in the dual relationship between subjectivities that constitute themselves in solitude, it would break with ontology as a thought of the Same, in the first case, what we have is an a-ontological pre-empiricity that traces out the contours of ethical unconditionality *before* entry into Being. This *a priori* condition, which is to say, the unconditionality of ethical responsibility and of hospitality, is also very close to the pre-empiricity of the transcendental structures of subjectivity, in both the theoretical and moral spheres, that Heidegger tracked down in *his* Kant. Indeed, to inscribe alterity in the pre-empiricity of the subject already means bending the subject toward its factual alteration; it means enjoining the subject to *be*, to keep open its original difference. Or rather: it is the subject itself that “senses” this injunction, and in its pre-empiricity, sensing the presence of the Other, is already led to act *in* Being, even though he perceives the injunction *before* Being.

This ethics is, therefore, an ethics of ontology that collocates Derrida at least in a middle point between the Levinas’s separation of ethics and ontology and the Heideggerian conjunction of the two spheres.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

4. JEAN-LUC NANCY'S ETHICS OF ONTOLOGY

Nonetheless, it is also true that the sense in which Derrida reconnects ethics and ontology is quite different from the Heideggerian attempt to define ethics as the dwelling in the proximity of Being in the *Letter in Humanism*. As we saw, in Derrida the ethics of ontology means rather the original diversification of the 'I' even in its pre-empirical structures, the alterity that inhabits the 'I' from the very beginning and that "enjoins" to the 'I' the fact of *being*, of existing. Perhaps the best way to understand this partial recovery of Heidegger's ethics of ontology, which is also a shift from Heidegger's formulation, is to refer to Jean-Luc Nancy's interpretation of Heidegger's "originary ethics"⁴¹.

The work of Heidegger is central to Nancy's thought, as he tries to retrieve early Heideggerian philosophy - dating back to the 1920s - in service of a philosophy of community. This thought is that of which Nancy defines as "being singular plural"⁴², that is, the fact that being is something immediately relational, as well as immediately relational is subjectivity itself. This leads us already to the point we have been developing throughout this essay: for Nancy, indeed, subjectivity and being coincide, as long as both are considered in a relational sense. Nancy sets off from Heidegger's paragraph 26 of *Being and Time*, in which *Dasein*, as being-in-the world, is considered also being-with (*Mitsein*). According to Nancy, this would demonstrate how Heidegger is the philosopher who managed to get closest to a thought of community as something constituted by plural subjectivities, that is, subjects who perceive their alterity within their theoretical constitutions as individuals (even if, in his following characterizations of community, starting from the sections of *Being and Time* on temporality and historicity, Heidegger himself completely abandons these ideas). From Nancy's point of view, this would emerge also in Heidegger's reading of Kant in the *Kantbuch*, where, as we noticed, Heidegger highlights the constitutive finitude of theoretical knowledge even in its transcendental structures. In a text entitled *L'imperatif catégorique*, Nancy applies this line of reasoning to the ethical sphere. Starting from the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives in Kant, Nancy interprets the concept of "pure practical reason as a transcendental structure, but whose

⁴¹Jean-Luc Nancy deals with the issue in: *L'"éthique originaire" de Heidegger*, published for the first time in *Dictionnaire d'éthique et philosophie morale*, « Heidegger », PUF, Paris 1996, and at a later stage in Jean-Luc Nancy, *La pensée dérobée*, Editions Galilée, Paris 2001. English version: *Heidegger's 'Originary Ethics'*, in *Studies in Practical Philosophy* 1999; 1 (1).

⁴²J.-L. Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, Galilée, Paris 1996. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne: *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000.

transcendence, given its moral connotation, is determined by receptivity to the presence of others⁴³. The constitutive presence of alterity in a transcendental structure of the subject ensures that the categorical imperative will therefore have the character of a pure element, but at the same time be indicative of a constitutive openness towards the other. This is the same structure that we saw at work in Derrida's reading of Levinas, and implies a factual, empirical, and ontological reference within the individual, something that is bent, in both Derrida's and Nancy's philosophy, towards the idea of an "alterity" which inhabits the individual from the beginning.

But to fully understand the ontological reference of this discourse, we have to come back to Nancy's aforementioned text. In *Heidegger's "Originary ethics"*, indeed, Nancy bends the ethics of ontology in a different sense to the literal meaning of Heidegger's text. But Nancy's reading is the one that allows us to better understand the way Derrida himself connects ethics and ontology, as in both Derrida and Nancy the refusal of Levinas' radical separation of the two spheres implies a retake of Heidegger which goes beyond him.

As Nancy claims in the text we are analyzing, the "originary ethics" of Heidegger should be interpreted not in the sense of a dwelling in the proximity of Being and a welcoming of its invocations, but rather as a "conduct":

Ethos needs to be thought as "abode" (according to Heraclitus's saying *ethos anthropoi daimori*). The abode is the "there" in that it is open. The abode is thus much more a conduct than a residence (or rather, "residing" is above all a conduct, the conduct of Being-the-there). The thinking of this conduct is thus the 'original ethics', because it thinks ethos as the conduct of/according to the truth of Being. This thinking is thus more fundamental than an ontology: it does not think 'beings in their Being', but 'the truth of Being'. It was already in this sense that the thinking of Being and Time designated itself as fundamental ontology. So it becomes clear not only that the thinking of Being involves an ethics, but, much more radically, it involves itself as an ethics. 'Original ethics' is the more appropriate name for 'fundamental ontology'. Ethics properly is what is fundamental in fundamental ontology⁴⁴.

The fundamental ontology is thus thought as the openness of *Dasein*, that is, as conduct that puts Being at stake. So far this discourse does not differ from Heidegger's. Nonetheless, the way the residence transforms itself in a conduct happens through the characterization of *Dasein* as Being-the-*there*. In his texts, Nancy often interprets the *there*, the *Da* of *Dasein*, in a spatial sense, as abandonment of its position. From an ethical stance, this implies the openness of *Dasein* as something which has within itself the principle of its own dif-

⁴³ See: J.-L. Nancy, *L'impératif catégorique*, FLAMMARION, Paris 1983.

⁴⁴ J.-L. Nancy, *Heidegger's 'Originary Ethics'*, cit., pp. 28-29.

ference, as something which differentiates itself, and thus contains the other in itself:

So ek-sistence is the way of Being of Being as *Dasein* (Heidegger 1993, 228). This way of Being is immediately a conduct- the conduct of Being-open to making-sense- a Being-open which is itself opened by (or rather, whose opening consists in) the desire /ability of sense. In that it is thus opened, this conduct is a setting-outside-itself, or ex-position as the very position of the ek-sistent. This Being-outside-itself, or this "ecstatic essence" (229), does not occur to an already given 'self'. It is, on the contrary, through it, that something like a 'self' (a subject, and a responsible subject) can come about⁴⁵.

This auto-differentiation, this being outside itself implied in the concept of *ek-sistence*, as we have noticed, has a direct relationship with space, with the abandonment of a position and thus with "action" as something which makes *Dasein* appear in the world and expose itself to the others. But both the auto-differentiation and the spatial abandonment of position are modalities of "being". The ek of the ek-sistence coincides with the *Da* of *Da-sein*; both mark the concept of *being* as a way of being outside oneself. This is the reason why Nancy can claim that

Being in ek-sistence consists in 'Being the there'. *Dasein* must be understood not adverbially and locally (Being there), but verbally, actively and transitively: Being the there. Hence, *Dasein* is definitely not the name of a substance, but the sentence of an action. 'Being there' in fact presupposes the dual prior given of a being and a place. But "Being the there" implies that Being properly ek-sists as its 'clearing' (229). By this 'clearing' one must understand not in the first instance an illumination or a revelation which comes and brings Being to light— but Being itself as an opening, a spacing-out for possibilities of bringing to light⁴⁶.

This final remark about *Being* as opening, instead of revelation, makes clear the shift from Heidegger's conception of the "originary ethics". Indeed, Heidegger put the response to the invocation of Being at the forefront. By this he meant the dwelling in the proximity of Being, whose openness had to be corresponded by *Dasein*. In Nancy's formulation, the openness is completely internal to *Dasein* as the entity that has the capacity of being different from itself- of differentiating itself. The *Lichtung* ("clearing") is not the space of a dwelling that conduces to a revelation of something external to *Dasein*, but is the internal space of *Dasein* as openness to the other.

This sort of reversal of the themes of the *Letter of Humanism* makes clear how for Nancy, as well as for Derrida, the formulation of an ethics of ontology

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 21.

is strictly connected to the “alteration” of the subject in its pre-empirical structures, an original *Mitsein* which arises in the individual consciousness and then transfers itself in the *a posteriori* relationships with other finite human beings. As noted, both Derrida and Nancy detect this structure of openness of subjectivity in some passages of Heidegger’s early philosophy, especially that of *Being and Time* and of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. This reference is explicitly formulated by Nancy, whereas in Derrida it emerges in a more indirect way through the criticisms of Levinas’s radical separation between ethics and ontology. But for Derrida, as well as for Nancy, the ethics of ontology assumes a sense which differs from the one Heidegger formulates in the *Letter of Humanism*. There is no Being to which *Dasein* should answer, dwell close to, but there is just the injunction of *being*, of inscribing in the praxis the original difference that inhabits the subject.

The reference to Nancy can then make clearer even the sense in which Derrida’s reading of Levinas’s writings preserve a basic continuity in all three of its moments. Indeed, the ethics of Being, the mutual implication of ethics and ontology, is not confined only to *Violence and Metaphysics*, nor does the re-evaluation of Levinas’s ethics prove to be inconsistent with Derrida’s path that starts from his criticism of Husserl’s consciousness-ism, which in the end renders his ethics of ontology “heideggerian” in the specific and particular sense Jean-Luc Nancy gives to the expression “originary ethics” from the *Letter on Humanism*.

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